

OPPORTUNITIES FOR PUBLIC POLICY EDUCATION IN THE EXTENSION INITIATIVES

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The National Extension Initiatives effort, announced by the Cooperative Extension System in February, 1987, ventured to: 1) concentrate resources on issues critical to the economic and social progress of its publics; 2) emphasize efficiency, accountability and clarity of mission; and 3) create and implement progressive change on critical national issues (Cooperative Extension System).

Why an Initiatives effort? First, the decade of the 1980s has been a time of continual review of extension's mission, goals and objectives. Nationally we have had "Extension in the 80's"; "Extension in Transition"; "Technology, Public Policy and the Changing Structure of American Agriculture"; "The Paradox of Success, The Importance of Priority Setting in Agricultural Research and Extension"; and "The Cooperative Extension System, A National Assessment," to name a few. Second, most states have experienced some sort of critique either internally generated or requested by the university president, dean(s) of particular college or schools, university governing board or the state governor or legislature. Whether all this produces greater unanimity of thought about Cooperative Extension Services remains to be seen. The Cooperative Extension System is a partnership struggling to work out new arrangements appropriate for the remainder of the twentieth century.

I believe the National Initiatives developed as a response to critical comments from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and possibly within the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) that formula federal funds should be used for programs of national importance, rather than left to the discretion of the states. Most states pool Smith-Lever 3b/c allocations with state and local appropriations to support the entire range of extension programming. The opportunity to attribute certain results to particular funds is thereby lost. This seems to be a problem for the management side of the federal establishment concerned about documenting the impact of federal expenditures. Congress, on the other hand, seems to understand and support a leverage concept. However, the bottom line is very clear, the federal partner is becoming less important financially and OMB expresses no interest in formula funding but sug-

gests strong support for focused efforts on matters of national importance.

The National Initiatives

In 1986, the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (ECOP) and the Extension Service, USDA (ES-USDA) identified priority initiatives:

- Competitiveness and Profitability of American Agriculture
- Water Quality
- Improving Nutrition, Diet and Health
- Revitalizing Rural America
- Alternative Agriculture Opportunities
- Conservation and Management of Natural Resources
- Family and Economic Well-Being
- Building Human Capital
- Youth at Risk (1988)

For each of the initiatives a series of critical issues was identified by task forces composed of ES-USDA staff and faculty from the 1862 and 1890 land grant universities. Extension issues were defined as “matters of wide public concern arising out of complex human problems” (Extension Service-USDA, et al.). They have these key features:

1. They exist in the external environment, the broad dimension of the entire society.
2. They have their source in complex problems—social, economic, political, technological—characterized by divergent viewpoints, shifting public perceptions and turbulent values in an age of dizzying instability.
3. They frequently involve conflict and controversy requiring the mediation of disputes and contending interests.

Priority is given to issues:

1. That can be acted upon by extension in ways that make a difference.
2. That are consistent with the extension mission and values.
3. That have support, or the possibility for the development of that support, from both extension and the general public.

The issues identified by each task force were meant to be suggestive but not inclusive of all possibilities states might want to pursue. Task forces recognized the importance of issues would vary among, as well as within, states. The educational opportunities envisioned for most of the issues would require development and conduct of programs directed at improving individual decision making

skills. Some issues are identified as public policy issues, including national issues as well as state and local issues.

Issues within the Initiatives

The task forces identified these issues:

Competitiveness and Profitability of American Agriculture

- Improve the economic efficiency and integration of knowledge into the total agricultural system from producer to consumer.
- Integrate marketing strategies into the production management system.
- Develop, apply, and transfer technology.
- Balance human nutrition and environmental concerns with competitiveness and profitability goals.
- Timely, accurate information to adjust production to global changes in supply and demand and profit opportunities.
- Strengthen business and community support systems.
- Agricultural policy.
- Develop U.S. fiscal, monetary, and trade policies that are consistent with international agricultural trade goals.
- Increase the quality of human resources in the agricultural system.

Water Quality

- Public understanding of the nature and importance of water resources.
- The impacts of chemicals on the water supply.
- Water conservation.
- Community control of water quality.

Improving Nutrition, Diet and Health

- Dietary practice related to lifestyle factors and health.
- Confidence in the safety, quality, and composition of the food supply.

Revitalizing Rural America

- Diminishing economic competitiveness of rural areas
- Dependence on too few income sources
- Growing service demands accompanied by diminishing resources
- Adjusting to the impacts of change
- Need for skilled community leadership
- Quality of the natural resource base

Alternative Agricultural Opportunities

- Maintain profitability while protecting the environment.
- Evaluating new enterprises.
- Exploring nonfarm income opportunities.

Conservation and Management of Natural Resources

- Sustaining a productive natural resource base.
- Marketing natural resource products and services.
- Natural resources public policy education.

Family and Economic Well Being

- Family financial instability
- Children at risk
- Vulnerable youth
- Family disruption and dislocation
- Responsibility for dependent elderly

Human Capital

- Facilitating career preparation and transition.
- Preparing youth for responsibility.
- Developing leaders.
- Renewing volunteerism.

Youth at Risk

No issues identified.

Public Policy Issues Recognized

The continuing importance of agricultural policy is evident in the Competitiveness and Profitability Initiative with traditional areas of agricultural policy work well recognized. The internationalizing of the agricultural economy means the impact of fiscal, monetary and trade policies on American agriculture takes on added significance.

The Water Quality, Conservation and Management of Natural Resources and, to a lesser extent, the Revitalizing Rural America initiatives stress the continuing importance of water as a contributor to growth and development and educational policy work relative to conservation and management practices that affect the renewability of our natural resources.

Revitalizing Rural America is in large part a rural policy initiative. To some extent it is a residual of our inability to consider the broader implications of particular agricultural policies purported to deal with the farm problem. We seemingly are challenged now by a de-

sire for more job opportunities and access to services for those choosing to live in rural areas. But what kind of a rural America do we want? I think revitalization of rural America attracts only modest interest as a national issue.

No particular policy opportunities are suggested as part of the Family and Economic Well Being, Human Capital and Youth at Risk initiatives.

Public Policy Opportunities Needing Attention

I feel there are policy issues whose importance is not sufficiently recognized within the Initiatives documents. They deserve attention, from both public policy educators and other research and extension colleagues. In my judgment these issues are very important to the public at large, to agriculture in general and to the integrity of our land grant-USDA extension and research system.

These issues are in the areas of chemicals, food processing and distribution, and development, application and transfer of technology.

Chemicals

Determine the need for and use of fertilizers, pesticides and feed additives in production agriculture.

Questions that need answering include, Why do we need them? How much do we need them? What do they do to the raw product? To what extent do they impact society beyond the actual raw food product? In other words, the public wants to know, What do chemicals do *for* us? What do chemicals do *to* us? Do we want it done? These issues now fall under the Water Quality Initiative, which is characterized by good intentions without the allocation of adequate resources. I believe the public will ultimately insist that chemicals be used only as needed to provide an adequate food supply and in such a way that unnecessary residual effects upon the environment are eliminated. Recommendations to this effect have already been made (National Research Council). Policy role decisions must be made to identify the relevant facts, the policy options and the decision makers.

Processing and Distribution

Define the need for various food additives in distributing raw products to the consumer or in processing raw products into consumable form. In other words, What did Alar do? How many Alars are there? Even if it is on the label do we know what its health impacts are? Processing, handling and distribution techniques also come into question during product recalls. How good and how safe

is our retail food supply? What needs to be done about it? As before, there is a role for policy in defining the relevant facts, the policy options and the decision makers.

Development, Application and Transfer of Technology

Certainly enough controversy was generated about the use of ice minus bacteria to reduce sensitivity to frost in California to convince us that new technology will engender widespread debate. Biotechnology seems to be at the center of concern, witness the current discussion regarding bovine somatotropin (BST). Concern surfaces about whether we really know enough to control the new application and whether we have assessed the long-term impacts on health and environment. A related issue is ownership of biotech applications and the result of one group controlling a crucial input when we have historically had broad access to new developments. The question might be, "What are the criteria for deciding whether biotechnology should be used and how it should be used in agriculture?"

I believe there is an expectation that colleges/schools of agriculture should be able to respond constructively and positively to the resolution of these issues. Long-term investments in faculty and facilities should have produced the capability to contribute effectively in these times when decisions are being made that may forever change how food is produced and distributed to the consumer. If we, the land grant colleges/schools of agriculture, cannot or will not be involved in issues of this magnitude, then why does the public need us for issues of lesser consequence?

Earlier I stated that the Family and Economic Well Being, Human Capital, and Youth at Risk initiatives did not reveal any particularly strong emphasis on policy. I believe the considerable policy opportunities within these areas did not receive appropriate recognition because policy is only now emerging as a legitimate area of work among faculties in colleges of home economics/consumer and family sciences. There is considerably less expectation from the public that such faculties can or should be expected to play roles of importance comparable to those roles agricultural faculties play in addressing the aforementioned issues. But I would suggest it is policy that stands at the very heart of whether and how such troubling conditions can be resolved. Family community leadership programs now underway in several states may provide the impetus for expanded policy work on issues affecting families and youth.

The Policy Environment

The issues deserving attention are complex and the affected publics large and diverse. Conducting public policy education in this setting will be a complex task made more difficult for extension profes-

sionals by conflicting public perceptions about agriculture and some ambivalence about extension within the land grant institution.

There seems to be a pervasive feeling among agricultural groups that they are victims of a sensationalized and biased press. For many years agriculture seemed to enjoy particular favor among our publics both as stewards of the soil, water and natural resources and providers of an ample supply of wholesome food at relatively low cost. This special status has seemed to erode under a deluge of revelations that probably reflects a more complete understanding of the realities than was true earlier. Don Paarlberg has long argued that agriculture was losing its uniqueness as a business enterprise as well as its power to control the farm policy agenda. If so, it is likely that the entire Cooperative Extension System (Extension Service-USDA, the land grant university, the colleges/schools of agriculture and the Cooperative Extension Service) is losing its uniqueness. If agriculture is thought to be a special interest group, does the public perceive the Cooperative Extension System as different from agriculture in terms of being trusted to state the case accurately and to examine all the alternatives encompassing the broad public view? Do land grant universities and colleges of agriculture perceive a role to serve the broader public interest or do they have separate agendas?

How important is an extension mission in today's land grant university? Schuh has raised serious questions about the sincerity of the land grant university in addressing this mission. While there is no disavowal of a broad set of responsibilities, it seems clear the major emphasis these days is research and that a university's reputation is in large part determined by its research standing among its peer institutions. Funding has exacerbated the problem. In our public institutions during this decade, public fund support for teaching, research and extension missions has been hard pressed to keep up with inflation. The only growth opportunity has been outside grants and contracts in support of research. Is it any wonder that extension, struggling with less federal support, has not been viewed as an important contributor to the university's prestige. The result is an erosion of extension as the unique contribution of American higher education and land grant universities that are becoming more like other public and privately supported universities.

We have long recognized that our colleges of agriculture were more committed to the land grant mission than were other parts of the university. But even here we seem to downplay our unique role. Bonnen describes the change in emphasis within our colleges of agriculture from problem solving research to disciplinary research and the resulting negative impacts upon extension programs. There is simply no way to avoid the conflict between extension, which believes it must be issue or problem driven, and the experiment station, which has become disciplinary and basic research driven. One

need only compare the Extension National Initiatives with the priority initiatives of the National Agricultural Research Committee (NARC) to see how different are the views of what each feels it should be doing. There is reasonable agreement on Water Quality and Nutrition, Diet and Health. The remaining research initiatives could conceivably provide important information for the two extension agricultural initiatives but over half of the extension initiatives will not be supported by research priorities.

National Extension Initiatives

- Competitiveness & Profitability of American Agriculture
- Water Quality
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NARC Research Initiatives

- Water Quantity & Quality
- Biotechnology
- Genetically Improved Plants
- Soil Productivity
- Pest Management
- Food Processing & Preservation
- Agricultural Product Diversification
- Animal Efficiency in Food Production
- Animal Health & Disease
- Food & Nutritional Health

The rather extensive listing of issues with recognized policy implications far exceeds the capabilities of our current policy staff. Will there be a redirection of effort of other extension staff or an assignment of responsibility to other faculty within our agricultural institutions? Clearly the array of issues will require talents not now available within USDA or our agricultural colleges.

How do we shift to a greater policy emphasis? How did the agricultural experiment stations change the orientation of our research colleagues? The answer is money, basically the allocation of support dollars, through competitive grants and contracts, that directs the effort of salary dollars. I believe the Cooperative Extension Service will need comparable flexibility to obtain and/or allocate support dollars if we are to more directly focus efforts on these issues. If ES-USDA is serious about focusing work on issues, including public policy issues, then it must either secure new funds (competitive grants or otherwise), which are awarded to the states based on the quality of the proposal addressing that particular issue, or require that existing federal funds be used only for approved purposes.

It is my view that public policy may well be one of the most important educational opportunities for the Cooperative Extension System in the years ahead. From my perspective there is: 1) great need to make informed decisions on issues of far reaching importance to our

publics; 2) a relative lack of knowledge of facts and a low level of understanding of the legitimacy of others' concerns among participants in the decision process; 3) reluctance to examine choices from a long-term perspective of what should be achieved; and 4) a humbling recognition that decisions will inevitably be made, with or without our efforts.

The question we must face is whether faculties can be convinced that they should be involved in such programs. Will faculty (including policy specialists) be willing to work together to develop and conduct a policy program? Do we have faculty with the needed expertise in our colleges of agriculture? If not, do we have flexible resources to get access to the expertise we need?

Whatever the answers, public policy has the potential to be the arena in which the Cooperative Extension System can make its most important contribution in terms of providing facts and analyses drawn from the latest in scientific knowledge incorporated in a decision framework to resolve complex issues. I have no doubt but what more and more decisions are going to be thrust into the public arena in an attempt to incorporate a greater range of viewpoints and broader considerations of impact.

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